



# A different model for school success: **Empower teachers**

Pioneering a new definition of teacher leadership could transform K-12. Expand what's already happening in some places.

**By Kim Farris-Berg**

Sometimes we are so accustomed to the way things are that we can't imagine a different way of doing things. For example, in 1927, one of the Warner brothers made a famously wrong prediction: "Who the hell wants to hear actors talk?"

When it comes to defining teacher leadership, how much do we limit ourselves by assuming that the way teachers work today must always be the way teachers work? Most of us assume that schools must be managed from the top down, so a teacher's job must be to implement and support whatever federal, state, and district leaders decide. We assume teachers are in charge of classroom management but not whole-school management.

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*Teacher Melissa Tonachel guides a student one-on-one while other students self-direct their learning at Mission Hill K-8 School, a Boston pilot school. Photo: Amy Junge*



We assume that if teachers want to progress professionally they must become administrators and leave their passion for teaching students behind. We assume “teacher voice” means having input in or being the face of someone else’s ultimate decision. We assume teachers don’t want to define these arrangements differently, and neither does anyone else.



Along with colleagues, Brenda Martinez (above) created Milwaukee Public Schools’ Academia de Lenguaje y Bellas Artes — a bilingual and bicultural school serving children preschool to 5th grade. The teachers sought to offer English language learners a learning program that research suggested would be highly effective. They were named 2013 Teachers of the Year by People magazine after being ranked as “exceeding expectations” on their 2012-13 report card. Photo: Amy Junge

(Below) Rural Minnesota New Country School (Henderson, Minn.) students, grades 6-12, are hard at work in their warehouse-style school building. Their teachers, working in partnership, decided that students would each have their own workspace with a computer to self-direct their learning. Photo: Ted Kolderie



In this context, educators and advocates have created and embraced professional learning communities (PLCs), hybrid roles, and teacher-led professional development. In some places, teachers can individually become curriculum specialists or project and team leaders. Teachers can even pursue a teacher leader certification to qualify them for such roles. These are excellent teacher leadership opportunities.

But limiting the scope of teacher leadership to opportunities that fit within current assumptions also limits teachers’ potential to use their leadership positions to choose or invent fundamentally different approaches to schools and schooling. Twenty years from now with the perspective of hindsight, we might want to kick ourselves for this.

Just as Mr. Warner failed to realize that some actors were ready to talk in motion pictures, too many of us are failing to recognize that a good number of K-12 public school teachers are ready to collectively design and manage whole schools, whole departments, and programs that operate across schools in a geographic area. What’s more, some of these teachers have very new and different ideas about how schools could operate.

These teachers are ready. Right now. Not just to influence classrooms and curriculum, but to change their schools’ entire approach to design and management. All teachers aren’t ready, and that’s just fine. Those who want to should be welcome to continue working toward improvement in conventional schools with conventional working arrangements for teachers.

But why deny the teachers who are ready to try something different the opportunity to make the decisions influencing school success? Why ignore the possibility that, just as expanding the concept of actors’ roles transformed the motion picture industry, expanding our concept of teacher leadership might be key to transforming K-12 teaching and learning?

### Pioneering teachers

Pioneering groups of public school teachers across the United States are already advancing a new definition of teacher leadership: teacher partnerships. As such, they’re securing autonomy to collectively make decisions that influence their whole school’s success. They have the opportunity to choose — even invent — their school’s approach to student learning. Among the areas of autonomy for teachers are:

1. Selecting colleagues;
2. Dismissing or recommending colleagues for transfer;
3. Evaluating colleagues;
4. Setting staff patterns;
5. Selecting leaders;
6. Determining budget;

7. Determining salaries and benefits;
8. Determining learning programs;
9. Setting the schedule; and
10. Setting school-level policies (such as discipline and homework policy).

My colleagues and I recently identified more than 60 schools where teachers have collective autonomy, and we studied 11 of them in-depth. We published our findings in *Trusting Teachers with School Success: What Happens When Teachers Call the Shots* (R&L Education, 2012).

We learned that teachers have arranged for their collective autonomy in district and charter schools. Some have union-affiliated teachers, and others don't. There are schools with teacher autonomy in urban, rural, and suburban settings across the nation serving students from preschool to age 21. Five of the 11 schools were at least 15 years old. Two were over 40 years old.

There is no single best way for teachers to arrange for their autonomy. Teachers secure their autonomy in varying ways depending on a host of factors, including state and local political climate, teachers' personal preferences, and union, district, and charter authorizers' openness to trying new things. Groups of teachers in Minnesota, for example, have arranged for their collective autonomy in three different ways:

- Teachers who wanted to design and manage what is now Pierre Bottineau French Immersion School applied to the board of Minneapolis Public Schools to be a self-governed school run by teachers, an opportunity made available by Minnesota state law.
- Teachers who started the Avalon Charter School in 2001 in St. Paul secured their school board's approval for their proposal to formalize teachers' collective autonomy via the school's governing bylaws. The board, which is held accountable by a state-approved charter authorizer, now in turn holds teachers accountable for their decisions but does not tell them what to do or how to do it.
- Teacher groups across Minnesota have been joining EdVisions Cooperative since it was established in 1994 by state statute. EdVisions contracts with charter school boards across the state, accepting accountability for school success in exchange for its teacher-members' autonomy to make decisions in all 10 areas of autonomy listed above.

There are other examples around the country as well; such arrangements now appear in 17 states.

- Teachers at San Francisco Community School (SFCS) operated with informally arranged teacher autonomy from 1972 through 2007. That year, a site government agreement between the San Francisco Unified School District and the school's governing board formalized their autonomy. SFCS teachers were invited to codesign the agreement. District and union leaders support this arrangement.
- In 1996, the Shasta County (Calif.) Board of Education authorized Chrysalis Charter School in rural-suburban Palo Cedro with the understanding that it would be run collectively by teachers.
- Since 1994, the Boston Public Schools have delegated authority to the governing boards of schools piloting new and different means of improving teaching and learning in an effort to better serve at-risk urban students. In at least five cases, including at Mission Hill K-8 School and the Boston Teachers Union School, the governing boards have informally delegated authority to the teachers. (This arrangement later came to exist in the Los Angeles Unified School District, too, and is increasingly being taken up by teachers with support from the United Teachers of Los Angeles union.)
- Teachers at Howard C. Reiche Community School in Portland, Maine, successfully converted their school's governance model from top-down to bottom-up in 2011 with school board approval. They are formalizing their arrangement with a memorandum of understanding between the highly supportive Portland Education Association and Portland Public Schools.

## Do teachers want it?

Are teachers interested in collectively running schools?

Teachers are rarely asked whether they'd be interested in the opportunity to collectively run schools. Public Agenda, a nonprofit issues research group, tested a national sample of teacher attitudes toward new working arrangements and reported the findings in *Stand by Me: What Teachers Really Think About Unions, Merit Pay, and Other Professional Matters* (Farkas, Johnson, & Duffet, 2003). Two-thirds of the new teachers surveyed (fewer than five years' experience) and half the veteran teachers (over 20 years) said they would be somewhat or very interested in working in an arrangement where they could run the school.

Met Life found in its 2012 Survey of the American Teacher that more than half of teachers are at least somewhat interested, and 23% are extremely or very interested in teaching in the classroom part-time combined with other roles or responsibilities in their school or district.

## U.S. schools with collective teacher autonomy



**Source:** Education Evolving. (n.d.). National inventory of schools with collective teacher autonomy. [www.educationevolving.org/teachers/inventory/map](http://www.educationevolving.org/teachers/inventory/map). Used with permission.

How much do we limit ourselves by assuming that the way teachers work today must always be the way teachers work?

The National Inventory of Schools with Collective Teacher Autonomy, accessible on the Education Evolving web site ([www.educationevolving.org](http://www.educationevolving.org)) highlights seven different ways in which groups of teachers are empowered to collectively run their schools. New arrangements are emerging this year as increasing numbers of pioneering teachers carve out the opportunity with their school districts or charter authorizers.

### Autonomy, school culture, and high performance

Make no mistake: Arranging collective autonomy for groups of teachers will not by itself transform K-12 public schooling. It is how these teachers opt to use their autonomy that has the potential to be transformative. As we consider whether to scale this model of school governance, we should be interested in the quality of teacher decisions and the potential for these decisions to address our national concerns about teacher quality, teacher retention, student achievement, and school safety, among other things.

Let's start with the quality of teacher decisions. My colleagues and I reported in *Trusting Teachers with School Success* that teachers who call the shots make decisions that emulate the cultural characteristics associated with high-performing organizations. We gleaned nine such characteristics from our review of the literature examining cultures of high-performing organizations in private and public sectors. Then, using teacher surveys and visits to 11 schools, we

learned that teachers who call the shots not only cultivate these characteristics, but their most prominent practices flow from them.

When teachers have collective autonomy to make the decisions influencing school success, they create cultures where they:

#### #1. *Accept ownership*

They welcome autonomy and responsibility for making decisions. In the areas where they secure autonomy to make the decisions, they are willing to accept accountability for outcomes.

Jill Mulhausen, a teacher from Washington, said, "We do not have the ability to blame the system, the students, or the parents. We made the decisions. There isn't a bureaucracy handling them. So we'll accept accountability."

#### #2. *Innovate*

Teachers with collective autonomy take risks to try creative new things, challenge old processes, and continuously adapt. They often group students by skill and not by age, for example, and most are committed to experiential learning. Five of the 11 teacher groups put middle and high school students in position to direct their own learning inside and outside of school, in consultation with teachers.

#### #3. *Share purpose*

These teachers create their schools' shared purpose and personify its mission, vision, values, and goals. In the 11 schools, teachers' shared purpose was always to nurture students as individuals. They don't view purpose statements as just words, but make them the basis of their collective decision making. The teachers said this is why they buy in and remain committed to their work.

#### #4. *Collaborate*

Teachers who call the shots participate in collaboration and leadership for the good of the whole school, not just a classroom. Their cultures are characterized by consultation, listening, openness, working together, and mutual respect.

Stephanie Davis from Janesville, Wis., described teachers' collaborative work. "We're accountable for the whole thing, so we work together . . . It makes us feel like, 'This is my school.' It's mine. I'm committed to it. It's not just a place where I work," she said.

#### #5. *Lead effectively*

Collective teacher autonomy puts in motion an entirely different structure of accountability. Many of these teacher groups want to focus on learning and not administration, so they select principals and lead teachers to handle these duties. The selected leaders



are seen as accountable and in service to the teachers who are responsible and accountable for school success — not to outsiders.

A Connecticut teacher said, “Because we elect our leaders, we have a strong vote of confidence in their work, and because [we require] those leaders to include us in all decision making and troubleshooting, we have a significant understanding of what makes this ship run. I’m proud to be a part of this team.”

#### **#6. *Function as learners***

The school cultures created by teachers who call the shots are characterized by a sense of common challenge and discovery, rather than a culture in which experts impart information.

#### **#7. *Avoid insularity***

Teacher choices are influenced by students, parents, youth culture, and technology trends. Teachers are less influenced by leaders in business, higher education, unions, and school districts, which often form barriers to innovation.

#### **#8. *Engage and motivate one another and students***

Most teachers with collective autonomy put students in a position to be active, ongoing learners. They also address social and discipline problems as part of student learning, bringing in more social workers and giving students real responsibilities for cocreating and coenforcing community norms. Many of these teacher groups measure student engagement as a function of the teaching and learning methods used at the school. The teachers make adjustments as they learn more about what works and what doesn’t for individuals (who, teachers note, need support to find their own sources of motivation).

Karen Locke, a Minnesota teacher, said, “We’re always learning how to teach in new ways. We are so challenged to try new things that will keep students interested . . . . We have to be innovating all the time.”

#### **#9. *Assess performance***

Teachers set and measure progress toward both teacher and student performance goals and act upon results to improve performance. Most use 360-degree or peer-to-peer teacher evaluation and make ongoing coaching and mentoring between colleagues the norm in order to ensure continuous improvement.

Jennera Williams at Mission Hill K-8 School in Boston said, “Having to set goals, and evaluate others’ accomplishments encourages a lot of personal growth. I think deeply about my progress toward my goals, and I am really self-reflective about how

I can improve.” California teacher Jessica Fishman said, “Coaching and mentoring creates accountability on another level — more than what comes from conventional evaluation.”

Many also focus on and measure students’ individual learning growth in academic, cognitive, and noncognitive areas of achievement.

Stephanie Davis said, “My job as a teacher is to help students identify and remove barriers to their own progress. I had the tools to do that when I worked in a traditional school. But the school structures didn’t allow for me to use them well. People need to recognize that ‘proficient’ [state-defined], for some, is a reach while, for others, it is far too low.”

### **Challenges**

While teachers with collective autonomy describe many rewards, they also report challenges. First, this is pioneering work. An infrastructure of support is only in the beginning stages of development, forming because settlers are now appearing who are seeking to learn from the pioneers. Pioneering teachers work long hours and with great intensity, especially as they get their schools and management systems through the start-up phase. They report they’ve never worked so hard, but most are also grateful to be so fulfilled and satisfied in their work. They do not regret their decision to pursue collective autonomy.

Most of the remaining challenges that teachers described had a common thread. Teachers with partial autonomy in some areas repeatedly expressed that they constantly have to justify why their unconventional ways of working and the unconventional learning models they create do not fit into conventional structures and expectations. They’re frustrated about how much energy they must spend advocating for the ability to access relevant professional development and seeking waivers from negotiated work hours, for example. They believe their time would be better spent on improving the cultures they are creating in their schools. They wonder if those who provide oversight and support could adapt their management approaches to be more open to differences.

Despite these challenges, many teachers are forging ahead. These teacher groups didn’t set out with a checklist of characteristics associated with high-performing cultures. But their design and management decisions, rooted in their collective knowledge, experiences, and ideas about what would make schools run well, happen to emulate the characteristics of high-performing cultures. These promising results help us gauge what we could expect if more teachers could call the shots. Trusting teachers is a strategy worth further exploration.

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## Fresh perspectives

En masse, the potential exists for teachers who call the shots to give us a fresh perspective about how to improve K-12 teaching and learning. For starters, these teacher choices call into question policy makers' allegiance to the idea that "getting tough" with teachers is the best bet for improvement. They cast doubt on federal and state leaders' growing tendency to tell teachers what to do and how to do it by tying teacher evaluations to mean proficiency scores, standardizing curricula, tightening licensure requirements, requiring adherence to pacing guides, and more. They implore us to consider whether we ought to try trusting teachers as a second major strategy.

Like most reasonable people, teachers have sought to avoid accepting accountability for outcomes of decisions imposed from the outside. Yet the actions of teachers with collective autonomy indicate that teachers are very willing to accept accountability for the outcomes of their own decisions. Teachers also can resolve many of today's hot button education issues themselves — far less need for politicians to take on heated battles and for states, cities, and districts to take on so much management.

Some teachers who call the shots, for example, negotiate waivers from collective bargaining agreements so they can increase their work hours and expand their roles. They also seek waivers to do more (not less) teacher evaluation and to require (not avoid) coaching and mentoring in the name of improvement.

Some teacher groups in both district and charter settings — the ones with the highest levels of autonomy in each setting — have decided that all teachers in their schools will have only one-year, at-will contracts for work. Responsible and accountable for school success, these teachers want colleagues to continuously put forth their best effort, and they want a means to remove colleagues who do not. Responsible and accountable for their school finances, they also know they must reserve the right to lay off even their well-performing colleagues when the budget is tight (although they work hard to find creative alternatives).

Union leaders have agreed to sign these waivers because teachers with autonomy arrangements have control over professional issues — something unions have sought for their members for decades. In these arrangements, teachers' employers don't make the decisions; teachers do. So union leaders don't see as much need to represent these teachers' professional interests to their employers. Union leaders can shift their role to supporting teachers in their new working arrangements, including advocating for their continued autonomy.

Student achievement? Teachers say they don't focus their school design and management around raising mean proficiency scores alone. They also

invest in measuring individual students' learning growth, engagement, and cognitive and noncognitive skill development. Some even invent new measuring tools. Readers might be expecting a mean proficiency score comparison here, and there might be some value to doing that. But let's face it: The dominant culture in education makes it too tempting to make the scores the focus of the entire conversation rather than focusing on all of the fresh insights teachers are bringing to the table. These teachers assert that mean proficiency scores, if a valid measure of achievement at all, are only part of the dialogue about student achievement, and perhaps we ought to follow their lead.

All of this said, empowering teachers with collective autonomy will not be a panacea. There will be mistakes and even flops. As more teachers embrace autonomy, they will need to seize opportunities to define and improve their craft. Policy makers and education leaders will need to work with teachers to identify and remove barriers to creating high-performing cultures. Unions could choose to evolve their roles. Teacher training institutions could support teachers' migration to managing whole schools with autonomy and accountability.

These ideas are just a start. Collective teacher autonomy will evolve, as will the infrastructure of support. Much more work will need to be done.

## Why risk being "famously wrong"?

The very existence of schools where teachers call the shots, and the ways in which teachers are using this opportunity signal that we can consciously move past our assumptions about the limitations of teachers' working arrangements. We can expand our concept of teacher leadership to include collectively running whole schools.

If all of our thinking about K-12 innovation and improvement, including our definition of teachers' leadership roles, assumes that teachers' work must be controlled from the top, then what might we be missing? We need to be far more conscious of our assumptions, and be willing to consider what could come from dropping them.

What would happen if more teachers were calling the shots? What would schools be like if more teachers were in position to design and manage them, using all of the professional knowledge and experience gained by working with their colleagues and students? How would teachers' design and management approaches, viewed en masse, influence our state and federal improvement strategies? Let's be open to answering these questions! Better to explore the potential means of K-12 transformation than to blindly stick with our false limitations, only to find we were famously wrong.



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